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SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

- 11. Mideast
- 12. Performance of Ariel Sharon

Key stories in the media:

The investigation of Elchanan Tenenbaum:

-In its expansive lead story, Maariv revealed that Shimon Cohen, Tenenbaum's father-in-law, was PM Sharon's agricultural instructor and friend, and that Sharon's late wife Lili was a partner in and managed for years a company owned by Cohen that marketed the produce from Sharon's farm. Yediot mentioned the connection in a modest news item. Maariv and other media cited denials by Sharon and his bureau that he knew about the family connection between Cohen and Tenenbaum. On Israel Radio, Cohen said that his connection with Sharon ended in 1975.
-Ha'aretz reported that Tenenbaum had top-secret military documents in his possession before leaving for Dubai. Ha'aretz says that its exclusive disclosure only heightens the mystery of why officials were in such a hurry last week to work out the controversial immunity deal with Tenenbaum.

Leading media reported that the U.S. and Israel will hold more rounds of talks in Jerusalem and Washington about Sharon's proposed "unilateral disengagement" plan before Sharon is actually invited to the White House. Jerusalem Post reported that Tuesday senior diplomatic officials downplayed reports in various Israeli media that the U.S. Administration told top Sharon aide Dov Weisglass that the disengagement move should wait until after the November presidential elections. Reporting on FM Silvan Shalom's diplomatic meetings in London, leading media wrote that the UK gives qualified support to the disengagement plan. Yediot reported that Tuesday British PM Tony Blair told him about his plan, according to which the territories would be divided into areas controlled by Palestinian officers not subordinated to PA Chairman Yasser Arafat. Yediot quoted senior GOI sources as saying that Israel and the U.S. reject the initiative and believe that it will only strengthen Arafat.

Ha'aretz quoted IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon as reiterating Tuesday before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that he opposes Sharon's plan to give up the "Philadelphi axis" -- the 100-200 meter wide strip of Israeli-controlled territory between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. Ya'alon said that should Israel concede it, the route would be wide open to arms smuggling from Egypt to Gaza.

Jerusalem Post (banner) and other leading media reported that Tuesday Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told the High Court of Justice that settlers must leave six West Bank outposts or else the IDF will evacuate them. Jerusalem Post and Yediot cited data released by the governmental Central Bureau of Statistics Tuesday: there were 1,850 building starts in the territories in 2003 -- a 35 percent rise from 2002. Also in 2003, total building starts in Israel fell to their lowest since 1989, the start of mass immigration from the FSU.

Jerusalem Post printed a Letter to the Editor from the U.S. Embassy Spokesman, criticizing an opinion piece about Rachel Corrie, an American peace activist crushed to death last year by an Israeli military bulldozer, published Tuesday in the newspaper by author Ruhama Shattan as "nothing less than hateful incitement."

Shattan had claimed that Corrie's "help in fanning the flames of violent anti-American sentiment" may have led to "the October 2003 bombing of the Fulbright delegation to Gaza to interview scholarship candidates, killing three."

All media reported that Tuesday a large-scale terrorist attack was averted in Tel Aviv, and that the security forces declared a state of alert and conducted searches mostly in the southern part of the city and the area of the Central Bus Station. A gag order was issued regarding the case.

Jerusalem Post quoted Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) as saying Tuesday that Arafat agreed that members of PA security forces would be paid directly, which Qurei said removed an obstacle in the way of vital foreign aid. Asked by Channel 2-TV Tuesday if Islamic Jihad was contemplating a truce in attacks against Israel, Nafiz Azzam, a senior member of the group, said that many in the organization have second thoughts on the matter in light of the frequent assassinations.

Yediot reported that a few days ago Qatari transportation official Akbar Al-Baker invited Transportation Minister Avigdor Lieberman to a professional conference that will take place in early May. The newspaper quoted Lieberman, "an unpopular figure in the Arab world," as saying that he is inclined to accept the invitation.

Leading media cited The New Yorker magazine as saying that an Israeli intelligence unit deciphered an Iranian code used in communications with Pakistan.

Yediot reported that the Immigrant Absorption Ministry has devised a plan nicknamed "Business IL" to make Israelis who left the country come back. The program, which includes loans and financial benefits, will first be publicized in a U.S.-wide campaign. The newspaper quoted skeptical Israeli emigres as saying that they might get loans but no jobs.

All media reported on Thursday's bombings against Shiites in Karbala and Baghdad, in which over 140 people were killed and hundreds of others were wounded. Leading media quoted Hizbullah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah as saying that Israel stands to gain from causing a war between Sunnis and Shiites.

All media reported that NASA revealed Tuesday, based on findings from its Opportunity rover, that water was once abundant on Mars.

I. Mideast:

Summary:

Veteran op-ed writer and the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's assistant Eytan Haber opined in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "The Americans, who have not greeted Sharon's disengagement plan enthusiastically, are giving him a 'hazing.'"

Conservative columnist Yosef Harif wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "Truth can't be concealed for much longer. Does Sharon have a silent understanding with Bush or is he just gambling?"

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "Why should Egypt agree to accept from Israel the role of a bit player in Sharon's disengagement plan?"

Palestinian affairs correspondent and far-left Palestinian sympathizer Amira Hass opined in Ha'aretz: "Despite talk of 'withdrawal,' Israeli society has yet to show any signs that it is shaking off the blatantly immoral logic that feeds the very existence of the settlements."

Block Quotes:

I. "Americans Give Sharon a 'Hazing'"

Veteran op-ed writer and the late prime minister

Yitzhak Rabin's assistant Eytan Haber opined in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist *Yediot Aharonot* (March 3): "The words that were not uttered by spokesmen in Washington were: 'Respected sir, we will not set a date for your visit, and you will not come here until it is absolutely clear to us what your plan for separation from your Palestinian neighbors entails.' Or in even other words: 'Have you coordinated your position with the Palestinians and Egypt? We want the Palestinians to agree to your plan. Don't trick us any more, the vagueness of your policies and actions may be your chief tool in war -- but don't use it here.' The Americans, who have not greeted Sharon's disengagement plan enthusiastically, are giving him a 'hazing.' They do not want any shockwaves in the Middle East before their elections. As far as they are concerned, Sharon will have to sweat some before he gets to shake George Bush's hand and bask in the light of the camera flashes. There are no free meals at the White House. Either way, Sharon's real moments of truth are drawing near. At the end of March he will go to Washington where he will be obliged to present a detailed and genuine plan to the administration. If the plan that he devised of late is genuine and is meant to be implemented (and I am certain that that is the case), the coming month of May, give or take a week or a month, will be a critical moment in Arik Sharon's political career."

II. "Sharon's Gamble"

Conservative columnist Yosef Harif wrote in popular, pluralist *Maariv* (March 3): "As far as he is concerned, the Prime Minister's latest diplomatic moves constitute a critical gamble, as he has placed all his chips in a single basket -- that of President George Bush. If the latter doesn't like his ideas, Sharon will be depicted as politically broke.... He doesn't intend to discuss with Bush an annexation of security zones included in Sharon's interim arrangement plan. In this regard, his ideas coincide with those once enunciated by Dr. Henry Kissinger: replacing the motto 'land for peace' with 'land for time' -- time for examining interim arrangements and chances for coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis. It is very doubtful whether the Palestinians would accept such ideas today.... If, after all, [Sharon] were prepared to sacrifice the Gush Katif [Gaza Strip] settlements and some other ones in the West Bank, one could apparently assume that Sharon did so because of a possible hidden understanding with Bush. This is what his associates believe. Truth can't be concealed for much longer. Does Sharon have a silent understanding with Bush or is he just gambling?"

III. "Gaza's Reluctant Neighbor Stays Aloof"

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning *Ha'aretz* (March 3): "It is a mistake on Israel's part to regard Egypt in the conflict with the Palestinians as a policeman tasked with catching smugglers. The role of the leader of the Arab world should be much broader -- on condition it indeed wants to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that threatens to sweep into its territory. Egypt has made efforts in the last two years to achieve a cease-fire, but the Hamas leadership out-maneuvered it without paying anything for the prestige that it won as a result of that Egyptian mediation. Why should Egypt agree to accept from Israel the role of a bit player in Sharon's disengagement plan?"

IV. "Words Have Failed Us"

Palestinian affairs correspondent and far-left Palestinian sympathizer Amira Hass opined in *Ha'aretz* (March 3): "This is an admission of failure. The written word is a failure at making tangible to Israeli readers the true horror of the occupation in the Gaza Strip.... A picture [too] may indeed be worth a thousand words, but for the Israeli occupation to approach some level of comprehension, Israelis need to see tens of thousands of photographs, one after the other, or watch documentaries that are at least eight hours long each, so they could grasp in real time the fear in the eyes of the school children when some whistling above turns into twisted crushed metal with charcoaled bodies inside.... The IDF operates within the logic of ... arrogant, cynical, and ruthless settlements of a privileged fat few sitting in the midst of the only land reserves that the Palestinians have in the Gaza Strip. Despite talk of 'withdrawal,' Israeli society has yet to show any signs that it is shaking off the blatantly immoral logic that feeds the very existence of the settlements. And that's as true

of the Gaza Strip as it is of the West Bank."

12. Performance of Ariel Sharon:

Summary:

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit "addressed" Prime Minister Sharon on page one of popular, pluralist Maariv: "For long weeks you and your associates explained why you are so determined to bring Elchanan Tenenbaum back home.... Why didn't you reveal the relationship between you?.... Go home."

Block Quotes:

"Return the Keys"

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit "addressed" Prime Minister Sharon on page one of popular, pluralist Maariv (March 3): "Mister Prime Minister.... For long weeks you and your associates explained why you are so determined to bring Elchanan Tenenbaum back home.

'Arik, savior of the Jews,' we named you. Poor Tenenbaum, they extracted all his teeth. The barbarian savages. Today he is in Hizbulah captivity, tomorrow who knows. Either he will be killed, or die of his own accord. And here, it is all tall tales. Neither teeth nor ears. The only savage we have seen here is Tenenbaum himself. A swindler who endangered state security for money, the man with a thousand faces, lies and families. Why didn't you reveal the relationship between you, indirect or direct, that was exposed today in these pages? What is so complicated about telling the truth?.... You dragged a government, a state, a nation in your wake. Without blinking. Is it possible that you don't even understand this? If so, it is an even harsher problem. This is, perhaps, your natural way of thinking.... There is no choice. You can no longer rule us. You have lost your basic legitimacy. We have lost faith in you. We somehow got through the stories, the recordings, the photographs, the denials, the silences. We tried to wipe the saliva off our faces and move on. We can no longer do it. For your sake, for our sake, for the sake of the country that means so much to you: vacate the stage, go to the president and from there go home, to the Sycamore Farm."

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